

CAMBODIA

You buried your children alive? Your wife? How could you do it? The man who came to my girlfriend's class had an answer. "Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge were about to enter the area. There was nowhere above ground to hide." Together the family dug the holes. The man did the burying. Tubes of hollowed bamboo brought air. He disguised all traces, and vanished. Soon the Khmer Rouge were poring over the ground. Suppose they found what they were looking for? Would they simply plug the tube up? Might they thrust something down it? To live in Cambodia then was to think of those things. Worst to imagine was that he himself might be caught. He would die knowing his children were waiting for him, unable to lift their arms.

THE COOL GUYS

One night in the locker room after school -- I think I was twelve -- the cool guys were holding court, and I didn't leave. It was great listening, pretending I could belong; maybe I thought I was learning something I'd someday be able to use. I remember the biggest saying something about the gym lockers, about how narrow inside they were. I notice everybody's looking at me. Next I'm screaming as they cram me in, metal creases slamming against my fingers, against the front of my face, against that ankle, same ankle, over and over. It would be better if I fit but I don't fit and I can't see and I also can't breathe and my spine's bent. A lock clicks. Good thing throats seeking air make that sound, that sound we rarely have to hear while awake. "Get him out of there." The door is opened. I have cool guys apologizing to me. I can't hear them. The jackhammer in my chest drowns out everything.

VIETNAM

Once when he was a kid they put a turtle in a tree. The thing had a shell anyway, that was the line, so somebody shinnied

up there lugging Mister Turtle with them in a bag. The guys picked a huge tree so it wouldn't matter that the turtle had its claws and head withdrawn; the kid just balanced the shell across the width of a branch. He then climbed down, careful not to shake the trunk. We've all been that cautious.

They expected a lot of excitement. After a minute or two the turtle tried to right itself. It fell a long way through leaves onto the grass. They weren't sure if it was dead. It kept itself retracted, and one kid said it must still be alive. That night they left it on the ground, to see if it would move. The next morning it had only moved two feet. Maybe somebody'd picked it up and set it back down again. They left it. It was still on the spot the next day. One kid wanted to smash the turtle with a hammer. "At least we can see if it's alive."

NOWHERE

He was a snot-nosed kid with glasses and a heinie haircut. His parents were poor and fat and ugly, and they were bored with being poor and fat and ugly, but ragging on the snot-nosed kid sometimes gave them a few seconds' relief so they kept at it, kept trying the experiment one more time making sure it worked and it did, it always did. The snot-nosed kid, if they ragged on him enough, had a way of heading for the back door and jumping on his bike. His mother had a way of shuffling to the screen door behind him. "Where you going?" "Nowhere." "Well don't be gone too long." Down the alley on the next block was a garage door with a scene of mountains painted on it. The mountains were chocolate and purple colored. A seagull flew across the foreground. Dots that might be mountain goats peppered the slopes. The snot-nosed kid with the heinie haircut liked to rock back and forth on his bike seat as he stared at the world that contained the mountains. He liked to think that a man with some cans of paint had changed that door into what he was staring at.